Travellers' choice of information sources and information channels for domestic trips

Del Chiappa, Giacomo and Balboni, Bernardo

University of Sassari, University of Modena

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Giacomo Del Chiappa
University of Sassari, Senior Research Fellow, School of Tourism & Hospitality, University of Johannesburg

Bernardo Balboni
University of Modena, Reggio Emilia

Abstract:
The topics of disintermediation and re-intermediation, both offline and online, have captured the attention of researchers and practitioners alike. Relying on an information search perspective, this study aims to identify which factors (i.e. different socio-demographic characteristics and travel-related variables) best predict whether a traveller will seek information from a travel agency or from a service provider (i.e. information source choice) and if this will be done face to face or through the Internet (i.e. choice of communication channel). Contribution to the body of knowledge and managerial implications are discussed and suggestions for future research are given.

Keywords: *Information source; information channel; disintermediation, short-haul travelling; Italy*

INTRODUCTION

Tourist information search behaviour is a topic of enduring interest for both academia and the industry and has been providing a conceptual basis for investigating many aspects related to online representation of tourism (Xiang, 2018). In this scenario, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have not only been instrumental in solving the information and communication needs of both industry and consumers, but also a transformational driver of the entire tourism supply chain and tourism industry (Sigala, 2018).

In recent years, the development of the Internet has increased dramatically, and many countries have made relevant investments to improve their internet services. According to Internet World Stats (2017), there are currently 4.15 billion Internet users worldwide, with significant penetration ratios in countries all over the world. In 2014, travel-related items (e.g. tours, hotels, airline tickets, etc.) were among the top five items consumers wished to buy online (United Nations, 2015) throughout the following regions: Asia and Oceania (The Pacific Islands), Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Latin America and North America.

The advent and development of the Internet has reshaped the way people plan for, buy and consume tourist products and services (Del Chiappa, 2013a, 2013b; Murphy, 2019), it has also opened up relevant business and marketing opportunities for all tourism firms (Akehurst, 2009) and it has become one of the most influential and relevant information sources in tourism, especially due to the recent and greater availability of Wi-Fi and use of wireless devices (Mackay & Vogt, 2012). This, coupled with the rapid growth of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) (e.g. Raab et al., 2018), User Generated Content (hereafter UGC), peer-to-peer applications (e.g. Fotiadis & Stylos, 2017), and sharing economy platforms (e.g. Airbnb), raises questions about the future of traditional travel intermediaries (Del Chiappa, 2013a; Del Chiappa et al., 2015; Revilla Hernández et al., 2016; Del Chiappa & Fotiadis, 2017).

The disintermediation hypothesis, which corresponds to the idea that the role of the middleman will be eliminated (Buhalis, 1998), has captured the attention of both researchers and practitioners for decades. More recently, due to the emergence of new e-intermediaries, specifically OTAs, great attention has been given to what has been defined as reintermediation, or cybermediation (Anckar, 2003). This term has been used to describe the utilisation of ICTs and Internet tools for developing new intermediaries, or for enabling existing intermediaries to re-design tourism distribution channels (Anckar, 2003; Zafiropoulos et al., 2015).

In this scenario it has become inadequate and misleading to investigate the issue of disintermediation as this was a problem of whether consumers would purchase from a travel agent or from the Internet, a perspective that has predominantly characterised existing studies. Undoubtedly, the choice for consumers still stands between buying through a travel intermediary or directly from a supplier. However, for both these options, there is a need to consider whether the consumer will deal with this choice in person or through some new electronic channel. This explains why recent research has been developed adopting an information search perspective and making a distinction between information sources and information channels (Grønflaten, 2009). However, it could be argued that research adopting such a perspective is still in its early stage and is confined to a very specific geographical area (i.e. Norway), thus rendering its findings geographically biased and hardly generalisable.

This paper was therefore carried out to deepen the understanding related to the topic of disintermediation from an information search perspective, thus answering Grønflaten's call to replicate his original study in other destinations to further validate his results (Grønflaten, 2009). In particular, this study intends to identify which factors (socio-demographic characteristics and travel-related variables) best predict whether a traveller will seek information from travel agencies or from a service provider (information source choice) and if this will be done face-to-face or through the Internet. To reach this aim, an empirical investigation was carried out in Italy on a sample of 363 domestic tourists travelling to Sardinia (Italy) (i.e. short-haul trips).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the Internet and UGC have started to pervade the tourism industry and the market, the economics of distribution, the distribution landscape in itself, and the dynamics involved in the tourism supply chain have been significantly altered and reshaped (e.g. Christodoulidou et al., 2010). In this scenario, companies have gained the possibility to reach their customers directly in order to offer them promotions and sales (Law & Lau, 2005; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017); hence, the role of traditional travel agencies has been rendered questionable (what is traditionally referred to as disintermediation).

Prominent arguments exist in literature in favour of disintermediation (e.g. the great flexibility and variety of consumer choice made possible by the Internet, compensating the perceived travel agency personnel's poor level of training and competence) and against it (e.g. travel agencies allow their customers to save time, provide a human touch, and ensure a reduction in uncertainty and insecurity by taking on responsibility for all arrangements) (e.g. Buhalis, 1998; Christou, 2011; Del Chiappa, 2013a). In the Internet era, new forms of e-tourism intermediaries were also born and gained a dramatic lead over the market share that tourism businesses were, and still are, able to achieve via their official websites, especially when the hotel sector is considered (Phocuswright, 2016; Volgger et al., 2017; Misirlis et al., 2018). This gives rise to the topic of e-reintermediation, a term that describes a situation where OTAs replace "brick and mortar" travel agencies and traditional tourism intermediaries (Anckar, 2003).

Tourists can be categorised according to those who only wish to use the Internet to acquire information (lookers) and those who also use it to buy tourism services and products (bookers). Travellers have access to a large number of offline and online information sources when planning their trip and making related decisions and choices. More in particular, these information sources can be classified as offline (e.g. brochure, print travel magazines, etc.) and online (destination websites, online reviews, etc.); commercial (i.e. tourism-business related) and non-commercial (e.g. friends, relatives and other tourists somehow spreading word-of-mouth and/or electronic word-of-mouth, etc.) (Engel et al., 1995); external (destination or service providers websites) or internal (e.g. prior experience, destination familiarity) sources (Gursoy et al., 2017; Gursoy et al., 2018).

Travellers' choices of information search strategies can be influenced by several primary factors, including traveller socio-demographics (age, gender, cultural background, etc.), product characteristics (e.g. travel purpose, type of trip, mode of travelling, etc.), travel-related characteristics (e.g. prior experience, travel party), situational factors (e.g. time constraints) and environmental factors (e.g. distance to the destination, the degree of novelty associated with a destination) (Gursoy & Chen, 2000a; Snepenger, 1987).

As far as socio-demographics are considered, it has been shown that the propensity to purchase online increases with age, education level and income (Bonn et al., 1998; Law et al., 2004). In particular, the propensity to buy online reaches its peak with middle aged people (30-49 years old) (Chiang et al., 2012; Christou, 2015). On the contrary, older travellers usually tend to choose offline (Beldona et al., 2011; Chiang et al., 2012), whilst young people, despite having a positive attitude toward online media (Sun et al., 2016), tend to purchase less due to a lack of sufficient financial resources and/or the unavailability of credit cards to make payments online (e.g. Dholakia & Ussitalo, 2002; Joines et al., 2003). According to Chiang et al. (2012) millennials in the 18-29 age bracket consider guidebooks and word of mouth as useful information sources, while older adults seem to prefer travel agencies and tour operators. Individuals who own a higher income and have higher education levels are more likely to use the Internet (Del Chiappa, 2013a, 2013b; Del Chiappa et al., 2015; Del Chiappa et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2004). According to previous literature (e.g. Coromina & Camprubí, 2016; Luo et al., 2004), differences in tourists' information search behaviour exist also based on gender, with most studies reporting male travellers being more likely to use to the Internet when compared to females (e.g. Del Chiappa, 2013a; Del Chiappa et al., 2016; Del Chiappa et al., 2015; Luo et al., 2004; Yasin et al., 2017). According to Gursoy et al. (2018), the online/personal information sources category is found to be the most important for domestic travellers with low destination familiarity, while the personal information sources category is the most important information source category for international travellers with low destination familiarity.

Based on product characteristics, current research shows that people usually buy convenience and standard goods online, while they rely heavily on traditional intermediaries when buying complex products (Werther & Klein, 1999). Similarly, it has been highlighted that tourists are more willing to buy low-involvement products through the Internet than high-involvement products (Chu, 2001). Existing studies have also found that short-haul travellers perceive traditional travel agents as biased operators (because they are commission-oriented) and less flexible or able to offer a good variety of choices (Law et al., 2004).

Based on travel-related variables, Fodness and Murray (1999) have found that families with children are likely to use street travel agencies as a decisive pre-purchase information source, whilst people travelling in non-family groups are more likely to use the Internet when compared to their counterparts, thus highlighting that relevant differences exist in information search and buying behaviour, based on the travel party. Snepenger et al. (1990)'s study highlighted that

tourists staying longer at the destination usually tend to rely mostly on travel agencies when compared to people staying for a shorter time; similar findings have been provided by Del Chiappa (2013a). Woodside and Ronkained (1980) also found differences based on mode of travelling with people travelling by plane, using travel agencies extensively when compared to their counterparts. Luo et al. (2004) found that the type of accommodation where tourists stay makes a difference, as people staying in hotels are usually more likely to use the Internet. Package travellers tend to prefer to be in contact with travel agencies and/or tour operators, or to use brochures, when compared to non-package travellers (who usually prefer to use the Internet) (e.g. Tjøstheim, 2002). Kim and Kim (2004) also found that business travellers favour traditional travel agencies when compared to leisure travellers. However, Chen (2000) notes that people travelling for business-related reasons are more likely to contact the service provider directly.

On the other hand, existing studies have yet to differentiate information sources (i.e. providers of information) and information channels (i.e. communication methods), thus generating misleading knowledge when talking about the topic of disintermediation. The only exception is represented by Grønflaten (2009), who analysed the topics of disintermediation adoption and information perspective, and highlighted that travellers are likely to choose the combination of travel agents and face to face when older than 59, travelling on an organised tour and being international visitors (specifically from Holland). However, existing studies devoted to deepening the scientific debate around the topic of disintermediation and distinguishing between information sources and information channels are rather limited in number and very site-specific, thus making any further research adopting such perspective noteworthy. This study intends to fill this research gap by presenting and discussing findings related to an empirical investigation on a sample of 363 domestic tourists travelling to Sardinia (Italy) (i.e. short-haul trips).

METHODOLOGY

Based on the use of the survey instrument adopted by Grønflaten (2009), this paper discusses findings of an empirical investigation on a convenience sample of 363 domestic tourists (aged 18 or older) who visited the island of Sardinia, Italy (short-haul trip).

The survey instrument included three sections. The first section asked respondents to assess the extent to which seven different information sources (i.e. travel agent, service provider, tourist office, journalists/travel reporters, other travellers, family and friends and online reviews) and five communication channels (i.e. face-to-face, telephone, TV, printed material, Internet) were important in choosing Sardinia as the tourism destination for their holiday. Respondents gave their answer using a 7-point Likert scale (1=not at all important, 7=extremely important). Following Grønflaten (2009), the second section collected data by way of a matrix displaying the information sources on one axis and the information channel on the other one. Specifically, the respondents were asked to first indicate which of the source/channel combinations influenced their choices to visit Sardinia; their answers were given by writing an "X" in the appropriate cell of the matrix. Then they were also asked to circle the most important one. The third section aimed at gathering information about socio-demographics (e.g. age, gender, etc.) and travel-related characteristics (e.g. travel party, length of stay, etc.) of respondents.

Data was collected using an ad-hoc questionnaire administrated face-to-face by two trained interviewers at airport and port areas in Olbia, one of the main gateways to the region. It must be pointed out here that the main emphasis of this research was to analyse if related differences between various groups of respondents in terms of their information source and information channel usage were based on certain variables rather than generalising our findings to the total population of Italian travellers. Drawing upon this idea, the data collection was managed to obtain a sample that would be heterogeneous enough in term of socio-demographics. This was done to ensure that all groups were adequately represented to facilitate statistical comparison. That said, we could argue that the sampling process was appropriate because the purpose of the study was to test the hypothesised relationships among variables and constructs, and it was not aimed at measuring the variation of the variables across a population (Filieri & McLeay, 2013).

The majority of respondents was female (56.9%), aged 30-39 (32.9%), with a high school diploma (46.8%) and with a monthly family income between 2,001 and 3,000 euro (31.5%). Most of them were independent travellers (89.8%), stayed in hotels (34.2%) and travelling with their family (51%) (Table 1). Mostly, respondents reported being repeat visitors (71.2%) and spending 8-14 nights on holiday in Sardinia.

FINDINGS

Tables 1 and 2 show the degree of importance that respondents gave to different information sources and channels when making their choices and the related priority.

Table 1. The Importance of Information Sources

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Travel agent	3.66	2.378
Service Provider	3.53	2.098
Tourist Office	3.40	2.147

Table 3 – Chi-square test of the four pairs of contrast variables

	Face-to-Face versus Internet		TA versus SP		TAF versus SPI		TAF versus OTA	
	χ^2	sig	χ^2	sig	χ^2	sig	χ^2	sig
Destination naïveté	1.142	0.285	0.434	0.510	0.007	0.932	1.328	0.249
Length of stay	7.790	**0.045**	8.803	**0.032**	4.809	0.090	1.245	0.537
Mode of travel	3.874	0.278	6.051	0.109	3.705	0.295	6.769	**0.079**
Accommodation	2.531	0.865	4.401	0.623	3.763	0.709	4.591	0.468
Travel party	5.338	0.149	10.731	**0.013**	10.453	**0.005**	3.516	0.319
Travel style	0.283	0.595	2.203	0.138	2.801	**0.089**	1.574	0.210
Gender	0.001	0.976	8.749	**0.003**	1.194	0.275	2.787	**0. 095**
Age	10.538	**0.060**	5.917	0.314	8.642	0.124	11.326	**0.042**
Education	9.337	**0.048**	4.486	0.344	3.397	0.494	2.090	0.554
Income	15.859	**0.026**	11.222	0.129	9.658	0.209	3.366	0.644
Nationality	4.408	0.221	1.011	0.799	4.604	0.203	6.206	0.102

TA = travel agency; SP= service provider. TAF= travel agent face-to-face. SPI= service provider over the internet. TAI=travel agent over the internet

Journalists Bloggers	3.16	2.036
Other Travellers	4.55	2.163
Friends & Family	5.03	2.078
Online reviews	4.34	2.339

When information sources were considered (table 1), respondents were reported considering "family and friends" as the most important source (M= 5.03, SD = 2.078) followed by online reviews (or the so-called user generated content) (M = 4.34, SD = 2.339) and travel agencies (M = 3.66, SD = 2.378).

When information channels are considered (table 2), respondents were reported preferring face-to-face interactions (M= 5.07, SD= 2.199) followed by Internet channels (M =5.3, SD=2.063).

Table 2. The Importance of the Information Channels

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Face to face	5.07	2.199
Telephone	4.08	2.315
TV	3.46	2.002
Print	4.1	2.035
Internet	5.3	2.063

Table 3 shows the results of a series of chi-square contingency table analyses that were performed to test the relationships between the contrast variable and each independent variable in order to identify the main predictors of information source and channel choice.

It is evident from the table that different independent variables affect the source, channel, and strategy contrasts in different ways. Specifically, decisions regarding information sources (travel agent versus service provider) were significantly associated with length of stay, travel party and gender. On the other hand, decisions regarding channel (face-to-face versus internet) were significantly associated with length of stay, age, education and income.

The first step was designed to analyse the choice of a face-to-face channel rather than a digital source. Specifically, the decision regarding channel (face-to-face versus internet) was significantly associated with length of stay, age, education and income. According to Chiang et al. (2012), millennials in the 18-29 age bracket consider guidebooks and word of mouth as useful information sources whilst older adults seem to prefer travel agencies and tour operators. Furthermore, the results of this study show that a higher length of stay is associated to the use of a face-to-face information source, rather than a digital information source.

The second step was designed to analyse the choice between travel agents and service providers. The choice of travel agent was significantly associated with length of stay, travel party and gender. Regarding the travel party, its

significance indicates that all travel party configurations differing from 'alone' are significantly associated to the use of travel agents.

The third step focussed on the choice of the combination of travel agents and face to face versus service providers on the Internet. Results suggest that preferring travel agents on the Internet is more likely associated to 'independent travellers' (rather than 'organised tour') and 'family' and 'nonfamily groups' (rather than 'alone').

The fourth step of analysis was designed to better understand the use of face-to-face travel agencies instead of a travel agent on the Internet. Findings reveal that the use of direct interaction with the travel agent is significantly associated with a mode of travel that includes travel by plane (as opposed to / instead of by ship), older age, and male travellers.

Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7 show the frequencies and percentages of independent variables according to the different information and channel strategies.

Table 4. Face-to-Face versus Internet

	Face-to-Face		Internet	
	n	%	n	%
Length of stay (n° of nights)				
0-3	3	1.9	5	3.4
4-7	27	17.1	43	29.5
8-14	76	48.1	56	38.4
> 14	52	32.9	42	28.8
Age				
< 20	3	1.9	6	4.1
20-29	25	15.8	31	21.2
30-39	45	28.5	52	35.6
40-49	35	22.2	32	21.9
50-59	24	15.2	14	9.6
> 59	26	16.5	11	7.5
Education				
Elementary school	2	1.3	2	1.4
Primary school	18	11.5	10	6.9
High school	69	43.9	64	44.4
University degree	60	38.2	47	32.6
Master/PhD	8	5.1	21	14.6
Monthly Income (euro)				
< 1.000	2	2.3	5	5.3
1.001-2.000	17	19.3	31	33.0
2.001-3.000	37	42.0	21	22.3
3.001-4.000	14	15.9	14	14.9
4.001-5.000	8	9.1	4	4.3
5.001-6.000	1	1.1	6	6.4
6.001-7.000	2	2.3	5	5.3
> 7.000	7	8.0	8	8.5

Table 5. Travel Agency versus service provider

	Travel Agency		Service Provider	
	n	%	n	%
Length of stay (n° of nights)				
0-3	1	1.4	0	0
4-7	15	20.3	17	47.2
8-14	37	50.0	12	33.3
> 14	74	28.4	7	19.4
Travel party				
Alone	1	1.4	2	5.9
With one other	43	60.6	13	38.2
Family with children	20	28.2	8	23.5
Non-family group	7	9.9	11	32.4
Gender				
Male	24	34.3	21	65.6
Female	46	65.7	11	34.4

Table 6. Travel agency face-to-face versus service provider over the Internet

	Travel agency face-to-face		Service provider over the internet	
	n	%	n	%
Travel party				
With one other	26	70.3	11	42.3
Family with children	10	27	7	26.9
Nonfamily group	1	2.7	8	30.8
Travel style				
Independent traveler	31	77.5	23	92
Organized tour	9	22.5	2	8

On the whole, our findings underline the importance of distinguishing between sources and channels, as the two types of decisions seem to be associated with slightly different sets of variables.

Table 7. Face-to-face travel agency versus travel agency over the internet

	Travel agency face-to-face		Travel agency over the internet	
	n	%	n	%
Mode of travel				
Flight	10	25	3	10.3
Flight and rent a car	13	32.5	6	20.7
Boat and private car	17	42.5	18	62.1
Boat and rent a car	0	0	2	6.9
Gender				
Male	16	42.1	6	22.2
Female	22	57.9	21	77.8
Age				
< 20	0	0	1	3.4
20-29	6	15.0	3	10.3
30-39	9	22.5	12	41.4
40-49	8	20.0	10	34.5
50-59	7	17.5	2	6.9
> 59	10	25.0	1	3.4

It is interesting to note that while mode of travel and age were not significantly associated with either the source or the channel decision alone, these variables resulted to be significantly associated with the strategy choice.

CONCLUSIONS

Information search process is one of the primary stages where hospitality marketers can influence tourists' decision-making processes. In fact, it is widely recognised that having up-to-date knowledge about how travellers acquire information through offline and online information sources and channels, which information sources and channels they use, and which factors actually influence information search and processing behaviour is critical for hospitality practitioners (Gursoy, 2018).

In this context, this study aimed to deepen the scientific debate around the topic of disintermediation interpreted both as a choice between two information sources (travel agents versus service providers) and between two information channels (face-to-face versus the Internet), thus adding updated and useful knowledge around this somewhat under-investigated research area.

From a theoretical perspective, this study addresses the topic of disintermediation, overcoming one of the main limits pertaining most studies devoted to this research area. In fact, as these studies include qualifying questions such as "Did you use a travel agent or did you use the Internet?", they might have an implicit bias in the research validity since the categories are not mutually exclusive. Hence, our findings revealed that the issue of disintermediation might be better understood by differentiating the choice between travel agents and service providers and the choice between face-to-face and Internet communication, also when the specific context of domestic /short-haul trips is considered. Chi-square tests of individual independent variables showed that the variables affecting the choice of information source (travel agent vs. service provider) were slightly different from those affecting the choice of information channel (face to face vs. Internet) and strategy. Compared to existing studies, our analysis offers somewhat contradictory findings, thus seeming to suggest that the socio-demographic and travel-related variables influence the travellers' choices related to information sources and channels in a different way when domestic and international trips are considered. For example, when compared to Grønflaten (2009) our findings confirmed that independent travellers tend to prefer searching for information by using the service providers' website rather than interacting face to face with a travel

agency. However, our study did not find any significant difference based on the travellers' age in the extent to which they tend to prefer to use travel agents rather than the service provider website when searching for information.

From a managerial perspective, our findings provide updated and useful information to policy makers, destination marketers and hospitality managers aiming to enable a more focussed media selection and tailored promotional mix to become more effective when marketing their destinations, tourist products, services and experiences. In particular, this study highlights that tourism practitioners should work with different criteria and should use a promotion and distribution strategy where the mix of information channel and source is adequately created to reflect the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists that they would like to target as much as possible, as well as the travel-related variables that characterise their travelling. For example, older male tourists travelling to Sardinia by plane and with their family for a longer stay should be targeted mainly by relying on face-to-face sources of information, particularly street travel agencies, rather than on digital information sources.

While this study contributes to fill a gap in existing knowledge and does propose some implications for practitioners, limitations still remain. Indeed, the main limitation is that the study is highly site-specific (i.e. travellers who visited Sardinia) and used a convenience sample. Thus, any attempt to generalise findings is questionable. However, it should be observed that the study was aimed at testing hypothesised relationships among variables and constructs, rather than at measuring the variation of the variables across a population. Furthermore, the study investigated only a limited number of information sources and channels. Future studies could include up-to-date and a greater number of information sources and channels (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.). Further, this study did not analyse the dimensions and hierarchy in which information sources and channel are used and whether differences exist based on different tourists' profiles and travel-related characteristics. These aspects would merit attention in future research, as has been highlighted by recent studies (Coromina & Camprubí, 2016).

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